



# The Road to Becoming a **RIGHT OF WAY** PROFESSIONAL

BY CHRISTOPHER MORGAN, SR/WA

Like others in the right of way profession, I feel fortunate to have found a career direction so early in life. Though not aware of it at the time, a passion for the right of way profession was kindled in me when I was just a teenager, many years before I realized that the entire industry even existed.

## WHERE IT BEGAN

It was at David Morgan Land and Timber where my informal education started. I was still in high school, and my dad was a land and timber trader in southeast Texas. Undivided interest tracts were his specialty. Now finding undivided interest tracts of thick pine and hardwood timber was difficult to begin with, but to research, locate and negotiate with each owner was a daunting task. The process involved researching every percentage of ownership and then finding each owner and acquiring their interest at the fairest price possible. I found it fascinating to watch.

Working just a few hours a week, I fondly recall carrying the large index books with my pencil thin arms over to the research tables. As I viewed the perfectly scripted names, an odd sense of tranquility would come over me. Looking back, it was those many afternoons spent checking title, playing private investigator, cruising timber and plotting deeds where my early training for right of way began. And I got to learn the old fashioned way without any help from technology.

After high school, I left my hometown and headed to Texas A&M University for college. During my first semester, I took the necessary courses to get my real estate license and before long, I was working in the real estate industry. It was then that I learned about negotiations, contracts and ethics. Although a real estate agent is quite different from a right of way agent, many of the principles and business practices carry over.

After several years working in real estate, I heard about an opportunity to acquire pipeline right of way. Knowing nothing about pipeline right of way, or even that a job existed to buy it (whatever “it” was), I was informed that my title and real estate background could actually help me land the job. During the interview I was asked what I knew about pipeline rights of way. I answered honestly, “I know they are a good place for deer blinds and feeders to hopefully catch a nice buck crossing.” Of course, I would like to think it was my previous title and real estate experience that helped me land that job, but it was more likely that they were in dire need of some help. So they hired me.

### ON THE JOB TRAINING

My right of way education started that very first day on the job. Initially, I worked in the office scanning easements and deeds to create electronic files. This was a great opportunity to read and learn about easement language, but more importantly, it gave me the opportunity to pick up tips and techniques simply by being around so many seasoned right of way professionals. After several weeks of scanning files, sitting in on project meetings, and asking what seemed to be unending questions, I was given the opportunity to ride along with an experienced agent. My instructions were simple – just listen; don’t say a word. While many of these trips were more about what not to do, tagging along with experienced agents to landowner meetings was an instrumental step in learning how to become a skilled agent.

There is little that compares to on-the-job training. After about as much office work and ride-along trips as I could handle, I finally got my chance to fly solo. I did well in the beginning, buying several tracts quickly and under budget. After my early success and several smooth transactions, I felt like a well-educated right of way professional. However, in every agent’s educational path, there comes a time when a particular landowner takes you to school. Luckily, it happened early on in my career.

My first experience of being “handled” by a savvy landowner was very eye opening. Or should I say humbling. It was then that I learned the importance of being patient and empathetic and that a successful negotiation comes from listening and putting yourself in the property owner’s shoes. It was during those early negotiations when I learned not only how to speak to landowners, but more importantly, how not to speak to them.

### TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

As an active right of way professional with some job experience under my belt, I was introduced to yet another educational resource. I had heard about the International Right of Way Association and the various courses available to right of way agents. What better way to learn about the industry then to take a course on the subject?

My first course was the Right of Way Agent Training and Pipeline Development Course, which provided a broad scope of some unfamiliar areas of the industry. This course not only strengthened my elementary base of knowledge, it introduced me to the organization that provides a wealth of training in an industry I was learning to love. Through IRWA, my education as a right of way professional has advanced significantly. IRWA has opened more doors and learning opportunities than I could have imagined. Learning from seasoned veterans with specialty qualifications and hearing about their unique experiences has given me the technical knowledge outside my area of expertise. I recently earned my SR/WA designation, and the coursework needed for this designation has literally

increased my knowledge ten-fold.

Not only has IRWA educated me in the classroom, but the learning opportunities gained through networking and event participation has truly strengthened my foundation. Through involvement in local and regional events and involvement with the IRWA Young Professionals group, IRWA spurs my education forward.

### LEARNING FROM MENTORS

I believe that what catapults an average agent to become a top professional is the quality of colleagues they associate with. I have attached myself to some of the best in the business, and they have shared an incredible amount of industry knowledge. There is really no substitute for a mentor. Someone who can give advice and help a young person avoid some of the more painful lessons in the business is invaluable. I have had the luxury of learning from several strong leaders and the privilege of two exceptional mentors, and I owe a special debt to them. These experiences have not only taken my education to another level, they are enabling me to become a leader in a new generation of right of way professionals.

Today, I still consider myself only a toddler in my educational journey. Even when I combine all my teenage courthouse excursions, real estate sales and negotiations, college coursework, on-the-job training, IRWA courses and mentors who’ve made a difference, there is still so much more to know. However, with a passion for this industry and a commitment to reach the top, I’m looking forward to all there is to learn. As my education as a right of way professional turns another chapter, I thank those who have come before me.



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